

Available online at [www.sciencedirect.com](http://www.sciencedirect.com)**ScienceDirect**

Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences 192 (2015) 695 – 702

**Procedia**  
Social and Behavioral Sciences

2nd GLOBAL CONFERENCE on LINGUISTICS and FOREIGN LANGUAGE TEACHING,  
LINELT-2014, Dubai – United Arab Emirates, December 11 – 13, 2014

## Increasing Cultural Competence for Saudi English Language Learners in the UK

Lamyaa Bin Obaid<sup>a\*</sup>

<sup>a</sup>Anglia Ruskin University, UK

---

### Abstract

Due to the wide cultural gap, university students in the UK from Saudi Arabia may often find cultural interaction overwhelming. The main objectives of this study are to explore the importance of cultural competence in English language learning for Saudi Learners in the UK context and to establish recommendations for including cultural competence in English language teaching and learning. There were 87 participants in total who took part in the study; they were subsequently split into 3 groups of 67, 10 and 10. The study employed an action research model which included a preliminary investigation using 67 quantitative questionnaires and 10 qualitative semi-structured interviews. Subsequently, a two day intervention workshop took place and was attended by 10 Saudi participants studying in the UK. This intervention was evaluated through semi-structured interviews in which the students were asked to cite the benefits or equally the disadvantages of such initiatives and to talk about their struggles of cultural competency. The conclusion is that some form of cultural awareness preparation, such as workshops, can be beneficial for newly arrived students in the UK

© 2015 Published by Elsevier Ltd. This is an open access article under the CC BY-NC-ND license

(<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>).

Peer-review under responsibility of Academic World Research and Education Center.

*Keywords:* Saudi learner; cultural competence; intercultural competence; language learning; difficulties

---

### 1. Introduction

Increasing Cultural Competence for Saudi English Language Learners in the UK. The aim of this paper is to demonstrate the proposition that improving intercultural competency assists Saudi learners to attain advanced language and literacy competencies in their second language learning. This conjecture was devised from my

---

\* Lamyaa Bin Obaid Tel: +868778990812

E-mail address: [limo\\_1973@hotmail.com](mailto:limo_1973@hotmail.com)

personal experience as a Saudi learner of English as a second language, as well as from my interactions with English language learner peers from Saudi Arabia. Data from a set of pilot studies, which included in-depth discussions, personal observations with fellow students and interviews conducted by myself, provided useful data. I have noted that while there is a considerable emphasis on the linguistic capabilities of students newly arrived in the UK, there is less importance attached to their 'cultural competency' once they have entered into the British higher education system. The definition of cultural competency used in this research is as defined by Fung, Lo, Srivastava and (Andermann, 2012) as the method whereby each person and practice behaves with respect and appropriately to individuals from all cultures, languages, ethnic backgrounds, races, religions, classes and other elements of diversity

## 2. Literature Review

Several studies have been conducted on the subject of the effect of intercultural competence on second language learners, for example (Georgiou, 2010; Peterson and Coltrane, 2003; Sinicrope et al, 2007; Vickers, 2008; Ziad, 2011). However, these do not specifically provide much insight into the sociocultural challenges faced by Saudi students studying in the UK.

Furthermore, although certain studies such as that by Alqahtani (2011) have explored the cultural competence of postgraduate Saudi students, the focus has been more on the academic language needs of postgraduate Saudi students in British higher educational institutions and the problems they encounter with academic culture here. However, it does not provide much understanding about the problems faced by *undergraduate* Saudi students. Additionally, it does not throw light on the effect of decreased cultural-competence in terms of these students' awareness of the cultural contexts, social and behavioral norms, beliefs and values of the culture belonging to the new language they are learning.

Research conducted in the United States also explored intercultural communication between Saudi Arabian and American businessmen (Adelman and Lustig, 1981). This particular study concluded that both groups had major difficulties in arranging ideas of intercultural communication, suggesting that further strategies are required to address these difficulties. Whilst the Adelman and Lustig study provide some insights into the intercultural communication issues faced when Saudi and native English speakers interacted with one another, the study is relatively old and is in need of updating. Furthermore, the two groups in question in their study were generally mature people with more life experience than undergraduate and postgraduate students tend to have. Lastly, the context of the study was that of business, whereas I would like to provide a better understanding of the difficulties faced by a growing number Saudi students entering the British higher education system.

Alhazmi (2010) investigated the effect of gender-segregated education on Saudi students entering Australian education. Although this study observed Saudi Students, the main focus was on how gender integration affected their learning and cultural identity, it did not explore the ways in which increased cultural competence through preparation within the host country could improve learning, as is my aim.

Nonetheless, the previous research discussed above does suggest that some action or training to address students' lack of intercultural-competence would be desirable. Further, I have discovered through my pilot studies that some minimal support, in the form of one-day training courses or orientation days, provided for students by the Saudi educational system upon leaving Saudi Arabia to study abroad would be useful. Based on my personal experience of the Saudi educational institution and literature search I hypothesize that minimal support is insufficient and does not meet Saudi students' cultural learning needs. Through a literature review, personal experience, an overview of the Saudi and British higher education systems, and social research involving interviews and questionnaires, this research will seek to address the question of how to close the apparent knowledge gap around the intercultural communication and cultural competence needs of Saudi students entering the British higher education system.

As pointed out above, the aim of this study is to determine Saudi learners' perceptions or understanding of cultural competence, and how this may be improved through using workshops as a means of intervention. From the literature and my previous experience the investigation questions to be explored are:

- Were students effectively prepared by their institutions or by the Saudi Government to deal with cultural diversity in the UK?
- Have the students had any negative cultural experiences in the UK and if so how they have dealt with those situations?

- Have they employed different approaches to deal with cultural differences in order to achieve intercultural competency?

What is the extent to which they have examined their own cultural identity and how strongly do they feel about it?

### 3. Methodology & methods

This is an intervention research and I have chosen action research as the main mode of investigation for this study as it is a powerful reflective tool with which one can collect different types of data from real life practices, and analyze this data in order to arrive at decisions regarding the way future practices should be developed in the light of actual practice. I have adapted the seven-step cycle for action research from Nunan (1992, p.19). Using this model helped to break the investigation down and plan the research more effectively, the seven stages of this action research cycle are as follows:

Stage 1: identifying a gap in knowledge through observation, and personal experience over two years.

Stage 2: preliminary investigations are carried out in the form of questionnaires followed by in depth interviews and systematic, qualitative and quantitative data collection.

Stage 3: proposal of a hypothesis that identifies the problematic issues, and suggestions of possible interventions.

Stage 4: intervention– a workshop was conducted to address issues from the hypothesis.

Stage 5: an evaluation- through semi-structured interviews to ascertain if the intervention has had the desired impact.

Stage 6: dissemination– after critical and contractive analysis the findings of my study will be shared with all other interested bodies.

Stage 7: follow-up– the findings and recommendations from this research will be shared with the Saudi Education Ministry.

The design of the preliminary research was based on a ‘mixed methods’ approach involving both qualitative and quantitative research which would assist the researcher to ‘triangulate’ the findings (see Neuman, 2011). The different yet complementary methodological approaches will be used to observe the same underlying phenomena, namely the intercultural difficulties faced by Saudi learners in UK higher education. The mixed methods approach to gathering data was used to enhance interpretability (Robson, 2002) and therefore improve reliability. The quantitative questionnaires were based upon a design proposed by Mason (2002), this involves providing Saudi students with written questionnaires available in both Arabic and English (hard and electronic copies) in order to measure their level of cultural competence. The answers to these questions were then examined, and problematic issues or barriers to learning were identified.

### 4. Preliminary Investigation Findings

The preliminary analysis sample consists of 67 questionnaire respondents of which 87% were aged 22 to 35 years, 15% of respondents were between 18-21 years old, 72% were between 22-35 years old, 13% were above 36 years old and there was an even proportion of female and male participants.

A preliminary analysis of questionnaire data and interviews identifies three main fears that students experienced before arriving in the UK: communicating in English, academic doubts and adapting to the British Culture. Half of the participants did not attend a course in Saudi Arabia about British culture or British academic culture or read about British culture before arriving. Even though most of the respondents’ felt they were well adapted, some had issues with respect to social interaction. 27% of questionnaire respondents reported that they had attended English Language pre-sessions in Saudi Arabia while 73% of respondents reported that they did not attend any English Language pre-sessions in Saudi Arabia as shown in figure 1. This may be further complicated as a third of respondents learned British English, another third learned American English and the last third learned both English types.

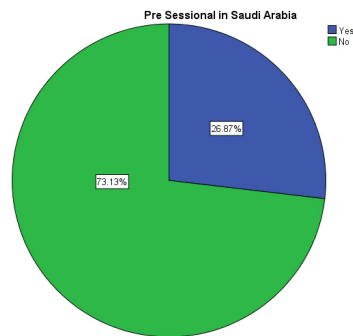


Figure 1: Pre-Sessional Attendance by Saudi Students

As deduced from the interviews the main fear was of confidence in communicating in English with others in the host country. One of the participants was afraid of the new culture and of communicating with others. She felt that her fears were due to that fact that she had no orientation courses to develop her awareness and confidence communicate in the UK. On the other hand, another participant did not have any orientation but felt she was confident enough to communication with a good degree of cultural awarenedd because she had previously travelled to the UK several times. This difference highlights the complexity of of the demands in giving effective support to students wanting to develop their cultural competency. Most of the participant's primaryexpectation before arriving in the UK was to obtain a high standard of education in order to improve their learning,culturalknowledge and skills.

Half of the students said that they did get an understanding of British culture from the English learning materials. However, the other half of the participants did not attend a course in Saudi Arabia about British culture or British academic culture; and neither had they read about British culture before arriving.

Issues faced by the students were also identified through the semi-structured interviews. For example a Saudi learner whom although had previous experience still lacked awareness of how to complain or how to claim his rights as a student. He had had difficulties in acquiring the appropriate language which may have been due to his difficulties with his tutor. A male learner related that the use of body language in debates and discussions was different in Arabic and English he said,

'The body language in Saudi Arabia during the speech is very high as well as raising one's voice and that because we are passionate people, while the British do not like it. It has happened to me once when I was arguing with the one person who got angry because I was pointing and raising my voice during my argument which I didn't mean to insult him'.

The findings of the preliminary research were used to better inform the intervention workshops. The aim of the workshops was to endeavour to overcome these barriers and improve the learning ability by raising the participants' cultural awareness of British culture.. The workshops used techniques of cultural comparison, discussion of possible solutions to issues and practical information dissemination. The feedback received on the day was very positive, with most of the participants rating the workshops 5 out of 5. Everyone except one of the participants returned for the second day the week after.

Currently, I am analysing the data collected through the semi-structured interviews held after the workshops. Most of the evaluation of the semi-structured interviews shows that participants gave positive feedback. Thus with careful consideration and examination I am confident that the results may be able to shed some light on to the issues faced by Saudi Learners with some possible solutions. The second two questions of the research will be answered when the analysis is completed.

## 5. Conclusion & Recommendations

The research found That supporting the students to become more culturally aware with issues in the host country would enable the learners to reach their full potential and may make their studies more enjoyable.

Moreover, effective recommendations for improving cultural awareness may lead to an increase in success for Saudi learners studying English in the UK.

The findings of this research may, in the future, be extended and explored further in order that other groups with cultural competency issues may enhance their learning of a second language

## 6.Acknowledgements

First of all I want to thank my mother for inspiration; my husband and children for supporting me with their time and patience; my supervisor Dr Sebastian Rasinger for his advice and motivation and Iman for giving me the opportunity to study at Al-Imam Muhammad Ibn Saud Islamic University.

### Appendix A: Interview

#### **Q: Tell me about yourself**

A: I am a lawyer and I have been here since December 2011.

I have many years of experience, I finished my studies 14 years ago, and I have 2 boys and one girl.

#### **Q: What is your level of English?**

A: Higher than the average, 4-5 IELTS.

#### **Q: Have you done a mock exam before you come to UK?**

A: No

#### **Q: What were your fears/concerns before arriving in the UK?**

A: IELTS

#### **Q: What about culture?**

A: I really am not convinced of the British culture because it is very difficult to communicate with native speakers people.

I now feel I am stronger than before with regarding the English language

I found the people in US are more sociable and friendly

#### **Q: What were your expectations before arriving in the UK?**

A: There are some friends who provided me the information before coming

I have studied English Language at one of the institutes in Saudi Arabia

I found the Institute in Riyadh is the same as the in UK.

I found some difficulties to socialize with my neighbours in UK.

As I have looked through YouTube to increase learning, but there is nothing voluble I can get benefit from.

According to my point of view that the student must be taught in Riyadh before coming to Britain, and not to send any student before they become qualified in English language and ready to commence their study in the UK.

Mixing with other English natives does not exist here

#### **Q: Do you think that because of mixing with Saudi people more than others is one of the problem that makes learning English is very difficult?**

A: On the contrary: I was in Leeds and I'm a very sociable person and I have been mixed with a lot of native speakers and I use to go out with them for long time but the problem comes from the English native speaker don't keep their friendship for long.

I have told them that I am keen of learning English, for example, there are two of them live with us and I told them that I'm willing to pay them £15 pounds per hour just for the sake of learning, but I did not find any welcome from them, but on the contrary, they became very cautious of talking about this topic.

Bear in mind that one of them I use to meet at the bus stop every day and the second is not far away from me.

My Learning English in the UK is very difficult.

Usually the interviewer prefers to speak Arabic rather than English, and the reason behind that is they found speaking English is very difficult.

#### **Q: What is your experience when you first came to Britain in details from landing at the airport, your movements, using your English language and dealing with people, everything about British culture at your first arrive.**

A: The most annoying thing is when they say they cannot understand me

I was thinking that people at the airport don't give the good impression to start a conversation with them.

**Q: How long have you been studying in the UK?**

A: I'm studying intermittently because I use to go back to Saudi Arabia due to my work circumstances, but now is better than ever before, note that the periods I were studying were very few because I had to sit at home with my young children, as I did not have a strong sense that I can overcome the obstacles of learning English Language and that was the reason that did not make me enthusiastic a lot in learning the language seriously.

Compared to others who have spent more time in the learning, I consider my English level is better than them.

I come to the UK as a companion to my wife who studying in the UK whereas other students have got scholarship which means they are dedicated to full time study and that affects your desire and impulse to learn.

Other problem is either I or my wife must be at home with my children and this is an obstacle to learn where the time is a key factor in language learning

**Q: Did you have an orientation course about British culture before you arrived?**

A: Neither higher education Department nor the University provided such a course

**Q: Do you feel comfortable getting involved in the UK community?**

A: Not too much so as to not being able to find native people to communicate with them.

**Q: Did you expect that there will be text relating to British culture when learning the language, especially when facing the related text of British culture-related?**

A: Sure I was expecting that, especially when studying Shakespeare's literature, at the same time the language used in the street contains some literature.

The difference between the English man and other nationalities is the English man not willing to give up something related to its roots and heritage.

**Q: Please can you describe your interaction with teachers and classmates in the lessons?**

A: Now the situation is better so at the beginning I did not know everything about the lesson and the situation become much better.

The problem is writing other than hearing and speaking, and the problem starts when we are asked to write the story.

**Q: Were you aware of the English learning style before arriving in the UK?**

A: A few to some extent because of some institutes where I studied was an American institutes, which depend on the play as a means of learning or learning through interaction

**Q: Are you studying at the Institute within the university?**

A: No But it is a commercial institute

**Q: What is the difference between the academy study in Saudi Arabia and UK?**

A: Tests in the United Kingdom are not important, but they concern more on the interaction in the class unlike Saudi Arabia.

I wish to begin undergraduate study again in order to be able to compare between studying in the UK and studying in Saudi Arabia, where I see that I did not take my chance in the study in Saudi Arabia.

I'm a lawyer, not academic and assessment method in Saudi Arabia is not feasible due to the evaluation committee from within the university and not from a third party and this why it is not effective.

This supports the IELTS assessment is to learn the language

But I am talking about the post as the IELTS language unwanted by teachers and students began averse to this test

**Q: From your experience, what are the challenges of learning English in the UK and what do you think needs to be improved?**

A: Writing needs to be improved, the age also is one of the obstacles.

An important issue of learning is to practice English language and sticking with all aspects of British society, such as television, English newspapers and others, all of those help in learning and not to be confused with any other English culture such as American culture, where is considered a barrier in English learning.

I use to communicate with others online but they are mainly Americans

**Q: From your experience, what are the positives of learning English in the UK and what would you recommend/advice for new SA students who will study in the UK?**

A: Institutes have quality of teaching in terms of technology because they maintain their own language for being part of the heritage, and the proof of that is that they get angry when others preference for them in terms of American language.

**Q: Are you sponsored by the government?**

A: Yes

**Q: Do you feel that the material life affects your education?**

A: Of course, as the children's entertainment requirements expensive and it is costly such as the region where I live.

The entertainment cost varies from one city to another, and high cost makes me give up entertain my children.

**Q: Do you have any stories or situations have occurred to you so that you said to yourself if you were to learn the nature of the British people before that you would avoid awkward situation?**

A: The body language in Saudi Arabia during the speech is very high as well as raising one's voice and that because we are passionate people, while the British do not like it.

It has happened to me once when I was arguing with the one person who got angry because I was pointing and raising my voice during my argument which I didn't mean to insult him.

It is a part of the culture and does not involve any derogation, where the debate in Britain must be calm and not kidding and it should be hands-off and you must keep a distance between you and the person you are discussing with. This was tiring for me in the beginning to get used to the new situation, unlike the situation in America where you can hand-kidding with the person without hurting.

As for the language, it is sometimes ashamed of contempt of others for being not know the language prevents you from speech and discuss it.

**Q: Do you feel the same sense in the classroom?**

A: As a result of living this problem, it have put limits with those who study with me, people have different background and you do not know anything about their culture makes you put some limits and boundaries with them.

**Q: When you start your study in the UK institutes, did they provided you such a courses that define the British culture and what you need to know about it?**

A: Yes, but in a simple and because it takes time the institute main aim is the money.

**Q: Is the British culture is an obstacle to learn the language or not? As the culture exist in the curriculum in the class, with the teachers and students and circle expand when dealing outside the institute.**

A: Permanent rejection culture which we been taught in our countries inhibits creativity and is a barrier to choose something you love and can excel in it.

**Q: Do you mind in dealing with the females in the class?**

A: I do not like to be in my class with female from Saudi Arabia in order not to get embarrassed as some people complying tradition and not religion.

## References

- Adelman, M.B. and Lusting, M.W., (1981). Intercultural communication problems as perceived by Saudi Arabian and American managers. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, 5(4), 349-363.
- Alhazmi, A., (2010). *Saudi International Students in Australia and Intercultural Engagement: A Study of Transitioning From a Gender Segregated Culture to a Mixed Gender Environment*. [pdf] Melbourne: RMIT University. Available at: <[http://www.cdesign.com.au/proceedings\\_isana2010/PDF/doctoral\\_paper\\_%20alhazmi.pdf?id=254&file=P:/Eventwin/docs/pdf/isana2010Abstract00026.pdf](http://www.cdesign.com.au/proceedings_isana2010/PDF/doctoral_paper_%20alhazmi.pdf?id=254&file=P:/Eventwin/docs/pdf/isana2010Abstract00026.pdf)> [Accessed 2<sup>nd</sup> December 2013.]
- Alqahtani, M., (2011) *An Investigation into the Language Needs of Saudi Students Studying in British Postgraduate Programmes and the Cultural Differences Impacting on them*: Thesis for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy. Available through: University of Southampton website <<http://eprints.soton.ac.uk/198175/6.hasCoversheetVersion/Binder1.pdf>> [Accessed 11<sup>th</sup> July 2013]
- Fung, Kenneth., Lo, H-T., Srivastava, R. and Andermann, L., (2012) Organizational cultural competence consultation to a mental health institution. *Transcultural Psychiatry* 49(2), pp.165-184.
- Georgiou, M., (2010). Intercultural competence in foreign language teaching and learning: Action inquiry in a Cypriot tertiary institution.



- Available at: [http://etheses.nottingham.ac.uk/1866/1/Intercultural\\_competence\\_in\\_FLL.pdf](http://etheses.nottingham.ac.uk/1866/1/Intercultural_competence_in_FLL.pdf) [accessed :13<sup>th</sup> June 2013].
- Mason J., (2002) *Qualitative Researching*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., London: SAGE Publications.
- Neuman, W.L., (2011) *Social Research Methods Qualitative and Quantitative Approaches*. 7<sup>th</sup> ed. New York: Pearson.
- Nunan D. (1992) *Research Methods in Language Learning* Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.
- Peterson, E. and Coltrane, B., (2003), Culture in Second Language Teaching. Digest [e-journal] EDO-FL-03-09. Available at [http://www.cal.org/resources/digest/digest\\_pdfs/0309peterson.pdf](http://www.cal.org/resources/digest/digest_pdfs/0309peterson.pdf) [ Accessed 2<sup>nd</sup> March 2013]
- Robson, C., (2002) *Real world research: A resource for social scientists and practitioner-Researchers*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Sinicrope ,C., Norris, J. and Watanabe, Y., (2007). Understanding and assisting intercultural competence: a summary of theory, research and practice (technical report for foreign language program evaluation projects). *Second Language Studies*, 26 (1), 1–58.
- Vickers, C. H., (2008). Expertise, Language competencies and the L2 user. *International Journal of Applied Linguistics*. Vol, 18, (3) 237–255.
- Zaid, M. A., (2011). The cultural perspective of socially mediated approach to language learning motivation and identity formation of a Saudi scholar: a case study. *IPEPR*. Vol.26. Singapore: CACSIT Press.